

U.S. COAST GUARD
MARINE SAFETY OFFICE PORTLAND, MAINE

SAFETY ALERT

Small Vessel Stability Warning

A 17 year-old Maine, youth, working commercially on a student lobster permit, drowned on May 22, 1998 after his small skiff capsized while harvesting off of York. The youth, who had altered a runabout to tend lobster traps approximately one month prior to the incident, was fishing alone during posted small craft advisories.

An examination of the skiff following salvage found that the vessel's propeller had been fouled by line from one of the youth's traps. Coast Guard investigators believe the boat was swamped while the youth was leaning over the transom of the boat to clear the propeller. The boat, which was built before requirements for inherent buoyancy and level flotation, sank quickly after capsize.

While this incident may at first appear to be isolated to the vessel in use, it is a continuation of a distinct trend of safety incidents in Maine's commercial fishing industry. Capsizes of small skiffs have been responsible for 7 of the last 20 fatalities in Maine's fishing industry. Some of these incidents involved skiffs used for transportation between the shore and larger vessels on a mooring, others involved skiffs used directly for harvest purposes.

The pattern of skiff related fatalities within Maine's commercial fishing industry suggests the possibility of an under-estimation of the dangers associated with use of very small craft. Skiffs are inherently susceptible to capsize and swamping, even in confined harbor conditions. Modification of these vessels into platforms used directly for fishery harvesting creates the danger of work being performed on vessels which are incapable of surviving the extraordinary conditions that may be associated with commercial fishing harvest activity.

Unexpected rough weather, gear hung down on the sea bed, propellers fouled with trap line are examples of conditions which may be encountered during fishing operations. Vessels used for commercial fishing must be able to withstand these conditions without risk of capsize, swamping or sinking.



This small skiff utilized for commercial fishing swamped while the operator was attempting to clear trap line which had fouled the vessel's propeller. Built before regulations which required inherent buoyancy and level flotation, the vessel quickly sank.

All vessels utilized for commercial fishing, including skiffs, are considered commercial fishing vessels and are required to comply with commercial fishing safety regulations, including life jacket, signaling equipment and regulations prohibiting vessels from operating in a manner which creates an especially hazardous condition.

While these regulations are intended to prevent loss of life at sea, the responsibility to address systemic safety problems rests with the men and women of the commercial fishing industry working with public safety agencies. This accident, which is part of a clear pattern of very small vessel accidents, highlights the need for the fishing industry to advance solutions to minimize further loss of life.

For further information on this Safety Alert contact:

USCG Marine Safety Office
P.O. Box 108
Portland, Maine 04112
1-207-780-3251 ext. 115

<http://www.biddeford.com/~msoport>